

## What Kind of World are Kids Growing Up in Today?

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Rich Nathan  
February 1 & 2, 2020  
Raising Healthy Kids  
Romans 12:1-2

I'm going to start a series today titled "Raising Healthy Kids". I want to begin by talking about the kind of world kids are being raised in today. There's been a lot written around the issue of generations.

If you're all in touch with the literature on generations, you know that different people classify generations differently. But for today's talk, I'm going to use the definition of Gen Z from the Pew Research Center – anyone born between 1997-2012 (ages 7-22).

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Gen Z – 1997-2012 (ages 7-22)

Gen Z, by the way, is the most popular way to describe kids and young adults in first grade to those who are old enough to have graduated from college. This generation of preschoolers haven't been named yet.

The idea of generations is that this cohort has some things in common, similar events have shaped their lives. For Boomers, Viet Nam and Woodstock. For Millennials, it's Columbine, 9/11 and the recession. One of the things that generations have in common is the technology that shaped the generation. For Boomers, we grew up with the growth of TV. Gen X grew up as the computer revolution took hold. Millennials grew up with the internet explosion. Gen Z has grown up with iPhones. They don't know a time we weren't walking around connected to the whole world.

Today's talk is aimed at any of you who are engaged with kids or with young adults or who are a young adult. I want to talk to parents. I want to talk with grandparents, teachers, coaches, volunteers with our kids or young adult ministries. There are many of you doing counseling with children or young adults. And if you are a child or a young adult, this talk is for you.

Marlene and I happen to be raising a 17-year old. She's a member of Gen Z. As I've observed her, her friends, her generation, there are some things you could say about this generation – and I think most teachers and parents and coaches would thoroughly agree. First of all, this generation is incredibly creative. My generation entertained ourselves by watching television or being sent out of the house by our parents to play. "Don't come back 'til it's dark! I don't want to see you in this house until dinner time!" That's how a lot of my generation was raised.

This generation is not sitting around passively watching TV. Young people have their own YouTube channels. Every young adult I know is making their own videos – some online demonstration of a new skill, trying out their comedy act, doing something for TikTok. I think of Billie Eilish

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Picture of Billie Eilish

Who is 18 years old. She began recording music in her bedroom and just won five Grammys. This is a super-creative generation.

And, secondly, it's an inclusive generation. One characteristic unifying Gen Z is that it's inclusive, including and accepting everyone – whatever their racial background or sexual orientation or gender or looks or disability. It is incredibly important to Gen Z that everyone feel respected, no matter who they are or where they're coming from. That's such an attractive quality.

They are creative, inclusive, and third, they are tech savvy. Older generations learned technology the way we learned a foreign language in high school. It's never natural. Gen Z learns technology as a native speaker. They had tablets in their cribs.

Now every one of us grows up with certain pressures, new things that are really unattractive about our cultures that hurt, that wound. The question that I'm going to try to answer today is this: What Kind of World are Kids Growing up in Today? Let's pray.

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What is the chief quality of the world that Gen Z is growing up in?

Today, I'm going to use an acronym to describe the world that Gen Z kids and young adults are growing up in, and that is the acronym:

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F.E.A.R.

I'll go over each letter in a moment. But fear describes the mood of the adults and kids today. Fear describes how many Gen Zers and adults feel a lot of the time today.

Surveys taken over the last five years tell us that the most frequent emotion adults experience as they tried to raise and teach and lead kids today is fear. Think of all the emotions that an adult could have toward kids – excitement or hope, anger or

optimism. The number one emotion that adults express regarding the next generation is fear.

Parents worry that their kids are not going to be physically safe at school because of school shootings. They are afraid of social media that their kids are being exposed to. They are concerned about their kids' mental health. They're worried about drug abuse. We live in a world that bombards us 24/7 with threats to our kids. Our phones ring with Amber alerts or another abduction story or a disease outbreak or another shooting. There's a new allergy that you have to guard your kid from. There's a diagnosis regarding our kids' mental health that if you miss it, they're doomed.

On top of all of that, parents experience anxiety about whether our kids will get into the right college or earn that scholarship or hang with the wrong kind of friends or marry the wrong person, or not be able to get a job or afford life. The overriding emotion in adults today regarding their children and their children's future is fear.

I ask you, parents, grandparents, do any of you identify with this all-pervasive fear? On the flip side of our fear, what every mental health expert tells us is that kids and young adults suffer from a much higher level of anxiety than any previous generation on record.

The American Psychological Association published a report last year which said that Gen Z had the worst mental health of any previous generation. 81% of teens say they experience high levels of stress. Gen Z young adults said they often feel depressed and anxious. Again, adult fear and kids' anxiety are two sides of the same coin. We have over-functioning, over-protective adults and under-functioning, over-diagnosed kids. There are dozens of verses in the Bible that tell us that fear is no way to live. Don't swim in the waters of fear. Here's what the Apostle Paul tells us:

Slide Philippians 4:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Jesus himself knows more about life than anyone who ever lived. He urges us this way:

Slide Matthew 6:34

<sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Let's look at some of the consequences of the all-pervasive fear of our culture. Let's look at some of the consequences that have been produced in the life of our kids and young adults. I'm using the Acronym FEAR.

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F. Fragility created

Maybe you heard the story a few years ago of two parents, Alex and Danielle, who lived in a suburban Maryland community. They allowed their two children, a six year old and a ten year old, to play at a nearby park unsupervised. A concerned parent called 911 about two kids who were playing in a park without their parents watching. The police picked the kids up and returned them home. The kids were allowed to go out again and play at another park unsupervised. But they didn't come home at the designated time because they were once more picked up by the police. Another anxious parent called 911 because these two kids were playing unsupervised. So these "negligent parents", Alex and Danielle, got a visit from Child Protective Services. They were investigated.

Eventually, it was determined that they were fit parents to raise their six-year old and their ten-year old. Now, mom didn't take this lying down. She ran for local office and has done a lot of publishing around the subject of being a "free-range parent" instead of always wrapping our kids in bubble wrap. The truth is that despite the fact that we're bombarded with messaging about all these dangers to our children 24/7, violent crime in America has actually gone down almost everywhere over the last 30 years. Kids are actually safer now than they were a generation or two ago. But fear causes us to treat our kids as if they were fragile.

And the E? Not only is fragility created but

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E. Experience lacking

Both are tied together. Parents are more anxious so we won't allow our kids to have normal experiences of independence. Playgrounds today have had their jungle gyms removed because schools are afraid they are going to be sued and they have been sued. Research will tell you that figuring out a jungle gym is actually good for our kids. It helps our kids navigate scary situations. But we've taken that experience away.

For many of our kids, the only experiences that they are getting in life are supervised experiences by a coach or a teacher or a parent micromanaging every moment. Or kids have virtual experiences – where they get to live vicariously through watching someone on YouTube do something perfectly. But real world experience – trying and risking and failing and falling on your face is becoming rarer and rarer for kids and young adults.

Fragility is created. Experience is lacking. And

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#### A. Adolescence extended

These things are all connected. Kids are being exposed to adult information and images at younger and younger ages. Every adult would say that what we have today is a profound loss of childhood innocence. We overprotect kids from all kinds of perceived physical dangers, but we under-protect kids from images and information flooding and shaping their thinking and imaginations. So, kids are entering adolescence more quickly. At the other end, adolescence is being extended. More schooling is required to get a good job. It's harder and harder to live on one's own. Many young adults still live with their parents well into their 20's. Marriage is being delayed as is child bearing.

The period of time of functioning like a teenager is both getting younger and getting older. And then, as we consider the acronym FEAR, the R is

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#### R. Rewards expected

Every child who has ever played in youth sports now has shelves of trophies and ribbons and medals. I read a story last year of a Florida teacher who was fired because she refused to comply with the school's "no zero" policy. The school had created a rule that if a child failed to turn in an assignment, that child could not get a zero on the assignment even if the teacher made a reasonable allowance for the child to make up the assignment and the child still didn't turn it in.

The lowest grade that a child could get on an assignment they simply didn't do was a 50. They would get half credit for doing absolutely nothing. This Florida teacher refused. She said, "I'm not going to give a kid half credit for doing absolutely nothing." So the school fired her. This teacher, Mrs. Tirado, wrote a note on the school white board as she left. Here's what she wrote:

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Hi Kids. Mrs. Tirado loves you and wishes you the best in life. I have been fired for refusing to give you a 50% for not handing anything in.

Think about it. Ask yourselves, Is that the lesson we really want to teach kids, that the world you're entering will reward you and pay you and celebrate you even if you do nothing? Is that what your boss is going to do? Or the client who hires you?

The world pressures us to fear.

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How should we deal with the world's pressures?

Here's what we read:

Slide Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I want to focus on that little phrase, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world". This applies to both parents and children. I want to underline this phrase "Do not conform to the pattern of this world" by having us listen to this phrase in various translations of the New Testament.

The Message version puts it this way:

Slide Romans 12:2b (The Message)

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

Here's the Phillips translation:

Slide Romans 12:2b (Phillips)

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould

And The Passion translation says it this way:

Slide Romans 12:2b (Passion)

Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you

In both the Old and New Testaments, God's people are called to radical non-conformity with the culture around us. Here's what we read:

Slide Leviticus 18:3

<sup>3</sup> You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.

Jesus contrasted the religious practices of Pharisees and pagans with his own followers. Here's what the Lord said:

Slide Matthew 6:8

<sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Radical non-conformity to the culture around us, that's what followers of Jesus are called to. Here's the deal: do the things pushed on our kids today bother you? The way kids are taught about sex and sexual identity, does that bother you? Are you bothered by the way that kids are taught about their identities – how they should see themselves, what they are taught to consider important by leaders in government and sports and entertainment? Does any of that rub you the wrong way? If you're not uncomfortable with the culture around you, whether it's American culture, Nigerian culture, Chinese culture or Brazilian culture – wherever you live – if a follower of Jesus flows easily and comfortably with the culture around them, something is wrong.

In contrast to our culture, adults ought not to be dominated by fear, and kids' lives ought not to be characterized by anxiety. Because we're called to this radical non-conformity we don't allow the world to squeeze us into its mold regarding entertainment choices, identity issues, the definition of success or anything else. Instead, we parents and grandparents and coaches and teachers and youth pastors who relate to kids and young adults in a way trains them to resist the world's conforming pressure.

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We want to raise a generation of resistance fighters

I want to finish this talk with another acronym. Kids and young adults are called to RESIST.

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R.E.S.I.S.T.

So what does a young person need to become a resistance fighter?

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R. Resilience

Resilience is the opposite of fragility. Kids can't keep being wrapped in bubble wrap because we're afraid they will break. It's good for your child to experience some failures when the stakes are low so that in the future the world doesn't give them greater pain. Let your child work out their problems with a coach without you running interference or work out their problems with a friend without you running interference. Let them work on their school projects by themselves. Let them go without lunch for a day because they forgot their lunch again. They won't starve to death if they miss lunch. Don't always argue your child's case with the teacher. Don't always run interference or take over so that they succeed.

It is OK for our children to be bored without us having to entertain them. It's OK for our children to be sad on occasion. The father in the story of the Prodigal did not over function; he let his son go. It's a hard thing to do, to release control of our kids.

There are few things in life more important than building resilience or grit into a child. What we want to do is raise kids that when they fall – and they will – they're able to get back up and keep going. We want children who can absorb a shock, who are able to push back and fight back. We want to raise a generation of resistance fighters!

If we want our kids to RESIST the pressure of this world – R – they have to be resilient.

And E. They need empathy.

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#### E. Empathy

Everything in our selfie saturated culture where phone companies estimate kids will take 25,000 selfies over the course of their lives teaches our kids to be entirely self-absorbed, me-centered, my needs always come before anyone else. If we're going to teach our kids to resist this incredible pressure to be self-focused, we've got to put them in situations to teach them empathy. One way to learn empathy is to be around suffering.

Brothers and sisters who are part of this church, take your children or your teenagers to one of our food pantries Saturday morning. And not just once, multiple times. If your kids are being raised in the suburbs they need to be exposed to people who are struggling in life. Have them pack a bag of groceries and give it to someone who has a need. Have your kids pray for people who have less than them. If you have the money, take your child with you on a short-term mission trip to a place in the world where people have less. Visit grandma in assisted living with your child even though it's boring or it smells bad or there's nothing to do there. Life isn't always about us and our happiness.

R. Resilient

E. Empathy

And third,

Slide

#### S. Space

Kids need margin. They are overscheduled. They are over-supervised. They are over-stimulated. They have no time to be or to think or play or use their imaginations. What

if, parents, we decided that our kids were going to play only one sport at a time? Or engage in only one school activity. I know how to read the cultural map. I know that you may, like me, feel like your child is falling behind on the college admission merry-go-round. But we can resist. It's ok if your child plays just one sport or just one instrument. It's OK. They don't have to play in the multistate select league because that's the feeder to the high school team because that's the feeder to the D1 scholarship and on and on and on.

You and your family need space to eat dinner together most nights. What if you had a rule – no phones or devices at the table for kids or adults? We need space. To talk. To laugh. To love. To breathe.

R. Resilient  
E. Empathy  
S. Space

Fourth,

Slide

I. Identity

The culture around us teaches our kids that their primary identity is about their gender or sexual orientation or how many likes they get on social media or their looks or their grades. What if a kid's or young adult's primary identity – the way they thought about who they were – was first and foremost who I am to God, "I am a child of God. I have God as my Father. I am a personal friend of Jesus Christ. I have the Holy Spirit living within me. I'm infinitely loved by God."

The most important thing in your life is not the likes you have on social media, but the love you have from God your Father. If the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in your life you're empowered to resist the pressure of the world. You're a new creation. You have a new relationship with God. A new power to overcome sin in your life. How are we teaching children and young adults to answer the question: Who am I? We want them to say, "I am a child of God. I am loved by my Father in Heaven."

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S. Sacrifice (your body)

The Apostle Paul says this in

Slide Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

You want kids and young adults to resist the pressure of the world. You, older adult, want to resist the conforming pressure of the world, surrender your body to God. If the Lord doesn't have your body, he doesn't have you. If he doesn't have your mouth, what you say is out of control, he doesn't have you. If he doesn't have your eyes and what you look at, he doesn't have you. If he doesn't have your ears and what you listen to, or your sexual organs or the rest of your body, he doesn't have you.

What if we taught kids and young adults and what if we as older adults gave our bodies to God every day? I've often practiced this little discipline before I get out of bed. Before I step foot on the floor, while I am still lying in bed, I name all the parts of my body and I give them to him. Lord, I give you my eyes today. Let me see what you want me to see and not look at what you don't want me to look at. I give you my ears, help me to not listen to gossip, to things that aren't true, help me hear people's pain. Help me to really listen. I give you my mouth, what goes into my mouth and what comes out – help me to speak kind and gentle words. I go down my body parts and I surrender them to the Lord.

Do you want to teach kids and young adults to push back against the conforming power of the world, we've got to teach them to resist. To give their bodies to God and to give their minds to God.

Here's the last thing:

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T. Thinking

Slide Romans 12:2

<sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

We're able to resist when we focus upon what we think about. The big key to resistance is to focus as parents, grandparents, teachers and coaches on what we think about.

The battleground is always in our minds. That's what the scripture teaches us. I was thinking about this the other day while I was reading history. During the Second World War, there were some battles taking place in North Africa, the Philippines, Southeast Asia. But the battles were peripheral. They weren't the main front. Our generals knew they wouldn't win until they got to Germany and to Japan because that's where the ultimate fight was. Until adults change our thinking – about our lives and our identities and especially about God – and we teach kids to change their thinking about these things, we won't win the main battle of resistance to the world.

To resist the culture, kids and young adults, just like older adults, need to have their minds filled with truth – truth about God, truth about the world, truth about themselves, truth about money and sex and success and relationships and what makes for a good life. If we're going to raise a generation of young people who are resistance fighters, who refuse to just go along with the opinions of the world, they need to be filled with the truth of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do not fear! Instead, practice resistance! Let's pray.

Here's the deal. None of us has within ourselves the will power or strength to resist the pressure of the culture around us. Our kids don't have that kind of inner strength. We don't have that kind of inner strength. The only way for any of us to resist the pressure of everyone around us – the pressure of our friends, the pressure of our families, the pressure of what's happening in the workplace or school. The only way for us to resist is if Jesus takes up residence in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. That's what it means to become a Christian, to have Jesus living inside of you by his Spirit. That's what the born again experience is all about. God's Spirit comes into your life and gives you the inner strength and the empowerment to push back against all the pressure you're under. Some of you have never asked Jesus to take up residence in your life to live by his Spirit on the inside of you to change you. The Christian life is not lived on our own strength or our own willpower. So, right now, if you are somebody who says, "I don't know that I have Jesus Christ living inside of me by his Spirit, but I want him there and I want Jesus to call the shots." I'm going to ask you to stand.

## What Kind of World are Kids Growing Up in Today?

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- I. What is the chief quality of the world that Gen Z is growing up in?
  - a. F. Fragility created
  - b. E. Experience lacking
  - c. A. Adolescence extended
  - d. R. Rewards expected
  
- II. How should we deal with the world's pressures?
  - a. R. Resilience
  - b. E. Empathy
  - c. S. Space
  - d. I. Identity
  - e. S. Sacrifice (your body)
  - f. T. Thinking